

“Repent!” Sermon: Advent 2. Year B
Mark 1:1-11. John the Baptist.
Fr. Hugh. St George. Dec 4 2011.

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The members of the board of a large Baptist church discovered to their great consternation that their Pastor had a bit of a drinking problem. Apparently he had a particular fondness for Peach Brandy.

They put their heads together to try to decide the best way of handling this problem.

One of them came up with a creative solution.

So the Board told him,

“We would like to give you a crate of the finest Peach Brandy, on the condition that you thank us from the pulpit next Sunday.”

To their great surprise he accepted.

The next Sunday he got into the pulpit, looked at the congregation and said:

“I would like to thank the Board for their generous gift of fruit - and the spirit in which it was given.”

Conventional wisdom cautions us that if you want your social get-togethers to be pleasant, you had better avoid talking about religion.

And if you really don't want to be invited to any parties, try talking not just about religion in general, but about 'repentance' in particular.

Nowadays, just as 2000 years ago, someone who goes around urging people to repent is met with

about as much enthusiasm as a visitor from the I.R.S.

Many people when they hear the word ‘repentance’ immediately panic.

“Repent! Why should I repent? I’m not a sinner. Not like ‘so and so’. Boy, does he ever need to repent.”

People imagine that God must be trying to stop them from doing everything that they like to do.

The great prophet Isaiah accurately predicted the events leading up to Jesus' birth. Isaiah also clearly predicted the life and work of John the Baptist.

A full 700 years later, along came John.

Now John was a very strange looking character. You can buy a really nice camel hair jacket from Brooks Brothers. But John wore the original right off the camel's back.

He lived off the land and ate nasty things that would make your stomach turn. He would certainly not be your first choice of a dinner companion.

“How would you like your locusts, raw or roasted?

Would you like some honey with that?”

But John the Baptist had a burning passion in his heart for preparing people to know the Lord.

He was sent by God with one message that he wanted everyone to get, to be ready for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And his message can be summed up in one word:

“Repent!”

Twenty five years ago I had the privilege of preaching in a wonderful old church in Hastings, a port town on the South Coast of England.

It was a very interesting looking church.

The lectern was a nautical compass stand and the pulpit was the prow of a boat.

It was a naval officer’s dream church.

After the service Khara and I had lunch with a fascinating elderly lady. She told us how sixty years ago she and her husband had been part of a team at a revival meeting in Wales.

The preacher, who was a well known evangelist, preached three nights in a row, in this Welsh port town.

Most of the people there were shipyard workers.

He spoke with great conviction of the need to repent and how repentance must be backed up with action to make amends.

The next week so many workers returned so much stuff that they had stolen from the shipyard, that they had to build a new warehouse to store it all.

In my former parish in California, there's a Thai restaurant that Khara and I liked to eat at.

It had an interesting sign on the wall.

I'm sure they never thought of themselves as theologians, but they were saying the same thing

about their restaurant that John the Baptist said about the Kingdom of Heaven.

The sign reads:

“We reserve the right to refuse admission to anyone, regardless of who you are, who you think you are, who your daddy is, or how much money you have!”

John spoke both a promise and a warning.

The promise goes like this: “Repent and be welcomed into the Kingdom of God.”

And the warning goes like this: “Refuse to repent and you will suffer the consequences - for ever.”

John made it clear that repentance requires action.

It’s not enough just to pay lip service to repenting.

It's not enough just to say, "I'm sorry."

It requires saying:

"I am through with that.

That is not going to be a part of my life any longer.

I am a new person by the grace of God."

John the Baptist said:

"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

What does repent mean? A lot of people think repentance means being hard on yourself and telling yourself what a terrible person you are.

We have inherited some rather strange ideas about repentance from the Middle Ages, with monks wearing hair shirts and whipping themselves.

This association of repentance with self-flagellation and languishing in misery still lingers.

I am glad to say that such practices are no longer considered necessary, even for clergy.

On the other hand many people misunderstand what is meant by God's unconditional love.

Privately, a lot of us like to think that we can get away with things, because after all, 'my God is unconditionally loving.'

We may not want to admit to this, but the fact that we repeat the same wrongdoings over and over

again, makes it obvious that we secretly, smugly, imagine that God will let us off the hook.

Yes, God's Love is unlimited.

But, God also wants us to change.

He has a plan for each of us.

He wants us to develop in His qualities. And we need to make room for those qualities to develop.

He wants us to clean house and get rid of ungodly ways, just as from time to time we get rid of some clothes, because they no longer represent who we are.

So what does repent mean? Repent means:

“Rethink this.” – “Take another look.”

It means “About Face.” Repent means “Change”

To be a truly good Christian means you must first honestly acknowledge wherever you are doing something that is not pleasing to God.

There's a wonderful old Chinese proverb that says: If we keep on going in the direction that we're going in, we're liable to end up where we're headed!

God requires something specific of us.

That something is repentance.

Repentance is the pre-requisite condition needed for us to receive His forgiveness, and to know His Love.

The Forgiveness is God's part.

The Repentance is our part. And it is simply a question of our taking responsibility for our selves.

Repentance means a change of heart.

It means a change of mind.

And it means a change of behavior. It is a change within that is demonstrated in an outer change.

Anything less than that is not repentance.

It's just one more shallow, insincere apology.

Unless we reform our behavior we will never know the inner experience of true spiritual growth.

As you look at your life, is there something that is keeping you from having the closeness with God that you would really like to have?

Is there something you do, that you know is not in accordance with God's will for your life?

The marvelous thing is that, contrary to popular thinking, repentance isn't hard.

It's resisting repentance that is hard, because we are resisting the inner prompting of the Holy Spirit on our conscience, and so we feel conflicted.

Repentance is a beautiful, liberating, healing gift from God.

For myself, a key point in my walk with God came, when I stopped looking at repentance as being oppressive, and started to see it as a wonderful opportunity.

It is the chance God gives us, the second chance; the nine hundredth chance.

Our God is the God of another chance.

OK. Here's your Greek lesson for the day:

Two Greek words - one of which is a very familiar word to all of us.

In the original manuscripts of the Bible there is a Greek word that we translate as repentance.

This word is Metanoia.

There are two possible responses to the challenge of the gospel. One of those is Metanoia.

It means a wonderful process of inner healing that God makes available to us.

When we truly repent we start to have second thoughts.

We start to see things from a new perspective - to face up to reality from a new position.

We can know we are truly forgiven by God and we can change.

That is liberating for our souls. – That is Metanoia.

There is another all too common response to the gospel.

When we resist the challenge of the Gospel –

When we resist God’s call to repentance, we begin instead to look for something, or someone to blame.

We blame the stars, or our parents, or our genetics, or our seventh grade teacher, or Congress, or anyone or anything else for our conduct.

We claim that life has been unfairly stacked against us. And the word for that is Paranoia.

“I can’t change. It’s just the way I am.

It's not my fault. It's because...fill in the blank.”

But the truth is that I am not fixed or stuck.

You are not fixed or stuck. We have the potential to be what God wants us to be.

Christ is waiting to restore us and lead us to wholeness. He wants to assist us in the process of renewing ourselves from the inside out.

The good news is that repentance leads to forgiveness, inner cleansing and peace.

It is never too early to repent.

Let us never allow it to be too late.